

ALFRED HITCHCOCK'S mystery magazine

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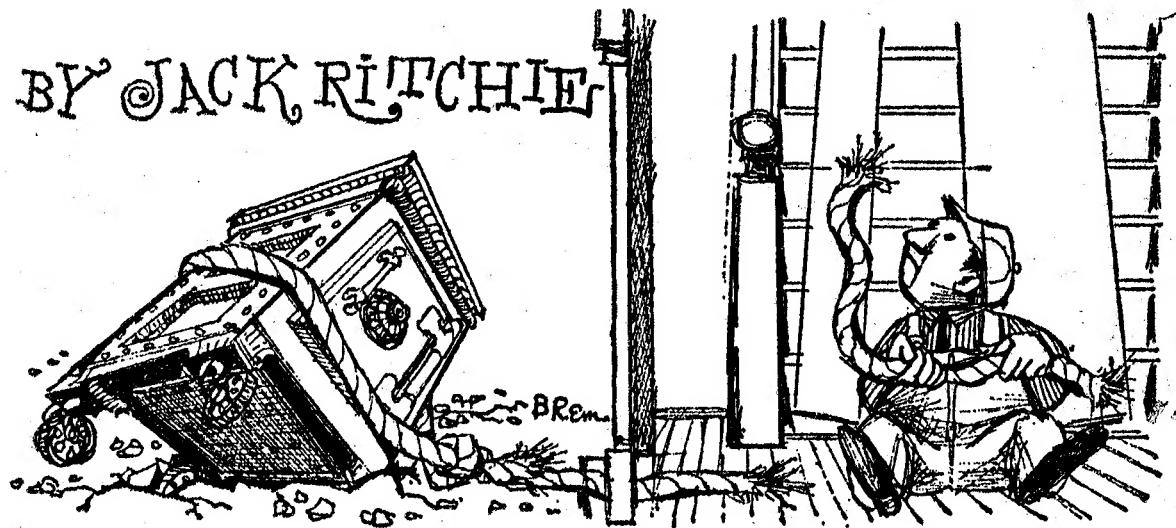
It was a Sunday morning, with the temperature in the lower eighties, when Jimmy and I took a walk down the main street of town.

Jimmy is nine years old and my landlady's son. He's a bright boy, and I'm very fond of him, but he can be a nuisance when he wants to be.

At the hardware store, we came on a group of about twenty or thirty people.

This is an anthropological study of small town life, particularly of the quaint custom of removing safes on Sunday morning—at church or fishing time. It is indeed a heart-warming account of crookedness among the meek and the lowly.

BY JACK RITCHIE



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I recognized just about everybody there and moved next to Fred Metrie. "What's going on here?"

Fred is a big friendly man. "They're moving the safe out of old man Thompson's office."

Elmo Thompson has his office on the floor above the hardware store.

"I guess Elmo's getting a new safe," I said.

Metrie grinned. "Why else would he be moving his old one out?" He opened his mouth wider and pointed to one of his lower bicuspids on the right side. "Say, Doc, that filling you put in has got a burr or something. It irritates my tongue."

"Drop into the office tomorrow, Fred," I said. "I'll grind it down."

A red two-and-a-half ton truck was backed up against the sidewalk curb with its tailgate down. The lettering on the door of the cab read, "Johnson Brothers, Hauling, Pine Creek." Pine Creek is about twenty miles north, along the lake shore.

Jimmy watched the two overalled men carrying two-by-six planks up the stairs. "How are they going to move the safe?"

Metrie seemed to have it figured out. "Put it on a rug, I imagine, and pull it to the head of the stairs. Then they'll slide it down the planks on the stairs and push it the rest of the way on those other planks right into the truck."

Jimmy thought about that. "Why don't they get a truck with a der-

rick and hoist the safe out of the window?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe they just don't have a derrick truck."

There were two men on the job. One of them was tall and heavy and the other was about the same height, but fairly slight. From their conversation, you could figure that the first one was Pete and the other Gus.

When they finished laying the plank, Pete got some rope out of the truck cab and they went up the stairs.

"I once saw the safe in Mr. Thompson's office," Jimmy said. "It's a pretty big old-fashioned thing. I don't think just two men can do the job."

"They'll manage," I said. I looked at the crowd. Everybody there was wearing Sunday clothes. "Somebody will probably come along and give them a hand. Somebody who's dressed for it."

Jimmy looked at the truck. "Pine Creek. Why doesn't Mr. Thompson hire Bill Jenkins? He's right here in town."

"Thompson could have sold his safe to somebody in Pine Creek and let them do the hiring," I said.

The crowd was getting bigger.

"Why should they move the safe on a Sunday?" Jimmy asked.

"Less traffic on the sidewalks and the streets, I guess."

"Is Mr. Thompson around?" Jimmy asked.

"I don't know. I haven't seen him."

Jimmy was quiet for awhile and then he said, "Did you look at their overalls?"

"No. What about their overalls?"

"They're brand new."

"What's wrong with that?"

"Funny both of them have on brand new overalls at the same time."

I patted him on the shoulder. "Let's go across the street and have a coke. No sundae. That might spoil our appetites for dinner. But I think we can allow ourselves a coke."

Jimmy peered up the stairs for a moment more before he moved.

We went into Harder's drugstore. Ed was behind the soda counter filling the cone rack.

"Two cokes, Ed," I said.

He nodded and opened the cooler. "I see they're moving old Thompson's safe."

"Looks like it," I said. "Somebody up in Pine Creek bought it, I guess."

Ed looked out of the window. "I'd think Thompson would hire Bill Jenkins. He's right here in town and he could do the work."

"Have you seen Mr. Thompson?" Jimmy asked.

"Nope," Ed said. "He's probably gone fishing."

"You'd think he'd be here and sort of boss the job," Jimmy said.

Ed grinned. "And miss fishing? Besides, he'd just get in the way."

Jimmy got off the stool and counted the change in his pocket. "I'll be back in just a minute," he said and ducked into the phone booth.

Ed Harder chuckled. "Is he calling his girl friend?"

I watched Jimmy in the enclosed booth. "He's not old enough for that yet."

Ed rang up the twenty cents. "How's the tooth pulling business?"

"Could be a lot better," I said. "If everybody paid their bills."

Ed grinned again. "I'll see what I can do the first of the month. I got a lot of bills to pay."

"So have I."

Ed drew himself a glass of water. "I heard you pulled out all of Thompson's teeth last week?"

"Just the uppers and there weren't many left to pull. I had to give him gas. He's a baby about something like that."

I looked across the street and noticed that a couple of the townspeople were lending a hand.

Jimmy came out of the phone booth. "I called Mr. Thompson's boarding house. His landlady says he's out fishing. She doesn't know exactly where."

"Mr. Harder told you that," I said. "You wasted a dime. What did you call him for?"

Jimmy looked at his coke. "Oh . . . I just want to find out how much that old safe weighs." He was silent for awhile and then said, "His landlady doesn't know any-

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thing about him selling the safe?"

"Now why should she, Jimmy?" I said. "He doesn't tell her all of his business."

We heard sharp, abrupt shouts across the street and turned just in time to see the crowd scatter and the Thompson safe shoot out of the doorway, smash the planks leading to the truck and crash heavily onto the sidewalk.

The three of us hurried out of the drugstore and crossed the street.

The safe lay almost on its side, one corner having smashed and broken into the sidewalk.

"What happened?" I asked the heavy trucker.

Pete turned. "What do you think happened?" he snapped. "The damn rope broke."

Fred Metrie nodded. "They were easing the safe down the skids and it snapped. I kind of thought the rope wasn't strong enough, but I didn't want to put in my two cents' worth."

Gus looked at the safe and laughed nervously. "I'm in favor of just leaving it here."

Pete put his hands on his hips. "We got a lot of helpful watchers here. A dozen of you ought to be able to pick it up."

Fred Metrie shook his head. "You couldn't get a finger hold on the thing. Not the way it's dug into that pavement."

Pete scowled. "Anybody got any bright suggestions?"

"We could get Bill Jenkins'

truck," I said. "He's got a hoist and chains."

Pete looked at me. "How long would that take?"

"Just a few minutes. Bill lives around the corner. I'll be right back."

Jimmy and I walked to the corner and turned.

"Did you see their shoes?" Jimmy asked.

"What about their shoes?"

"Sunday shoes. All shiny. Nobody'd wear good shoes like that moving a safe."

Bill Jenkins lived in a small bungalow next to his filling station and garage. I thought that he might be home.

"Did you look at their hands?" Jimmy asked.

I sighed. "What about their hands?"

"They're white and didn't have calluses. Like they don't really do heavy work. I don't think those guys are the Johnson brothers."

"Boy," I said patiently. "The Johnson brothers could have hired them for the day. Maybe the Johnsons want to go fishing on Sunday too."

I pressed the buzzer at Bill Jenkins' door and after a moment he came to the door.

"Say, Bill," I said. "There's a little emergency job for you to do."

Bill was in his stocking feet and part of the Sunday paper was in his hand. "Can't it wait until Monday, Doc?"

"I'm afraid not, Bill. A couple of boys from Pine Creek were moving old man Thompson's safe out of his office and it got away from them. It's laying out there on the sidewalk and about the only way to pick it up is with your truck and hoist."

Bill had a grim smile. "So they botched up the job?"

"You heard about it already?"

"Just that somebody was moving the safe. My cousin Elmer phoned me fifteen minutes ago."

"Doctor . . ." Jimmy said

"How is Elmer?" I asked. "He made an appointment Saturday morning and then didn't show up."

"You know Elmer," Bill said. "Once a tooth stops hurting, he changes his mind about going to a dentist."

Jimmy pulled my arm. "Say, Doctor . . ."

Bill folded the newspaper. "Why didn't old Thompson hire me in the first place? I handle that kind of work too."

"We all got to live, Bill," I said. "The boys in Pine Creek too."

"I suppose so," he said reluctantly. "But I still think we should keep as much business in town as possible." He turned. "Just a minute. I'll find my shoes."

When Bill disappeared inside, Jimmy pulled at my arm again. "I think we'd better get the sheriff."

I lit a cigarette. "What for?"

Jimmy's face was serious. "I think those men are stealing Mr. Thompson's safe."

I laughed. "Don't be silly, boy. This is Sunday morning. Daylight. Nobody's going to be foolish enough to steal a safe when maybe a hundred people are watching."

Jimmy fidgeted impatiently. "Don't you remember that TV program last week? Where the man said that the safest place to commit murder was in Grand Central Station during the rush hour? You could kill somebody and fade into the crowd and be lost."

I shook my head. "Jimmy, what has old man Thompson's safe got to do with murder and Grand Central Station?"

"Nothing with murder. But you could steal a safe in the daylight like those men are doing, and nobody at all would figure what you were doing. They'd think you wouldn't dare."

I grinned. "You got an imagination, Jimmy. I'll say that for you."

"But we could at least *talk* to the sheriff."

"I'm afraid we can't do that, boy. When Thompson goes fishing he always takes the sheriff with him. And the Lord knows where that might be."

Jimmy's shoulders sagged a little. "Yeah, I forgot."

I tried to console him. "Why would anybody bother to steal old Thompson's safe? He's a lawyer, not a banker. I doubt if he ever had a dollar in that thing."

Bill came out of his house and we went to the garage.

I joined him in the cab of his truck. "Come on, Jimmy. Hop right in."

Jimmy held back. "You go ahead I think I'll go home and work on my model airplane."

There was quite a crowd in front of the hardware store now. Chris Nevert's County patrol car was pulled up to the curb and he was keeping order.

Bill swung the truck out into the road and then carefully backed up. Nevert directed the operation until the hoist was over the safe.

When I got out of the cab, Nevert grinned at me. "Nice day, Doc. You in the hauling business now?"

"Just tasting it," I said.

I noticed that Gus was looking a little sick and Pete seemed edgy.

Miss Erhling, who's our town clerk and in her seventies, pointed her cane at the ruined sidewalk. "Young man," she said to Pete. "Somebody's going to have to pay for that."

Pete closed his eyes for a second. "Sure, lady, we'll take care of it." He looked at the door of his truck. "Just send the bill to the Johnson Brothers, Pine Creek."

Bill Jenkins pulled down the hoist hook and fixed the chains around three corners of the safe. He worked the pulley until the safe dangled about six feet in the air.

Then he got back into the cab of his truck, pulled forward, and backed up until the safe was over

the bed of the truck from Pine Creek.

Chris Nevert watched critically and held up his hand. "Whoa! That's enough."

When the safe was firmly settled on their truck, Gus and Pete started for the cab.

"Hey! Wait a minute!" Nevert yelled.

Pete and Gus stopped as though they'd run into a stone wall.

They turned slowly and Pete said, "What?"

"You almost forgot your planks," Nevert said. He grinned. "Can't have you littering up the sidewalk. I could arrest you for that."

Pete took a deep breath. "We'll load the planks."

Fred Metrie helped them. He tossed the broken planks on the truck too. "Still a lot of good wood in them."

When they were finished, Pete looked at all of us for about five seconds, and then he shook his head.

The motor started then and Pete and Gus headed north, picking up speed.

The crowd began to disperse and Chris Nevert got back into his patrol car.

I leaned on the open window. "How's your garden getting along?"

"Not too well. Could use a little rain." He switched on the ignition of his car. "I was on my way to the Swenson farm. He's got a complaint

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that his neighbor, Hanson, isn't spraying his apple orchard and all of Hanson's bugs are crossing the property line."

"Those two have been feuding for years," I said.

When I got back to my boarding house, Jimmy was sitting on the steps with his chin in his hands and looking glum.

I sat down beside him. "The world been kicking you?"

"I'm just a kid," he said morosely.

"That's nothing to brood about. It's the best time of life. You've got no worries."

"But nobody listens to me. Not even the Johnsons."

"Which Johnsons?"

"The ones in Pine Creek I called them up and asked if their truck was stolen."

"Oh?"

"I guess they could tell I was a kid by my voice."

"What did they say?"

"They said they didn't have time for any jokes. They weren't going to be fooled into running across town to the barn where they kept their truck just on my say so."

"Never mind," I said. "Forget about the whole thing."

He sighed. "Did they take away the safe?"

"Yes," I said. "They took it away."

In the afternoon, about two-thirty, I got a phone call telling me to come to the sheriff's office. There were a lot of people there, including Fred Metrie, Chris Nevert, and Bill Jenkins, and most of them had red faces.

The sheriff told us that there had been twenty thousand dollars in the safe. Old man Thompson didn't like banks.

He also had a lot to say about the brains of people who stand around and watch a safe being stolen and even help as much as they can to steal it.

But I didn't really mind his lecture too much.

I had ten thousand dollars to think about. That would more than take care of my bills. That was my share of old man Thompson's money. Gus and Pete would split the other ten.

I thought that was fair.

After all, I was the one who had to find and hire them. I was the one who knew that the sheriff and Thompson would be fishing.

And I was the one who knew about the twenty thousand dollars.

Old man Thompson does a lot of talking when he's under gas.

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